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I am the Spider

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I AM THE SPIDER

After the meeting, Izzy catches me in the parking lot. She'd been talking to a few guys inside as I exited the stuffy school, escaping to the brisk autumn winds and charcoal pavement. I'm nearly to the door of my teal Geo when I hear her voice call out to me. My shoes glue the pavement: I watch her. She moves with a fragile grace, lumbering forth in four-inch black boot heels, wobbly like a top spinning its last few rotations.

"Room for one more?"

"I guess," I say. "No ride?"

"They said it'd cost me. I don't want to know what that means."

If I didn't know better, I'd feel sorry for Izzy. She's the only woman in our support group—most women go to M.O.M.—Mom's Off Meth—even if they aren't mothers. The guys surround her each week and she obliges them with bouncy tones and giggles, everyone taking their turn while I usually just watch and go. But tonight is different. I open the passenger door and let her inside. Willis, a redwood of a man bearing a crew-cut and big smile—a man who probably used to be attractive before his jaw started eroding and he lost his left canine—eyes us from the doors of Grant Elementary, smoking shamelessly.

Like the Willis, like everyone, I was entranced by Izzy when she introduced herself the first week. She took the front with her electric red hair, black eye-shadow attempting to eclipse the sunken sockets owed to a woman three times her age. Her testimony was all about the high, the warm clouds we've burrowed. She described the microwave lights, the flowers that grow out of your skin. How you can smell love, sweet like berries and cream. Doctors claim it's dopamine but we know better. It's a hidden silky layer of the world,

all the places between here and heaven.

Every week we sit in a circle as if to worship the air between our bodies, pretending we're improving. But the way our faces sag over our sharp frames convinces me our skeletons are tired of hiding beneath our skin. We don't want these lives. We want out.

I drive with one hand, tracing the milk-colored scar that runs across four knuckles. It's a tweakers' scar, leftover from when I assaulted a parking meter, split my skin wide like a bag of chips. The meter was blinking, asking someone's green Saab for money, but I was high and angry, felt offended by its insistence. During meetings, I ride the waves of my handbones; gives me something to do while people tell their sad stories. With Izzy next to me, I do it because I'm nervous.

She takes me to some trashy brick apartments downtown. I try to be funny and normal, tell her she doesn't have to go on a date with me.

"It's only fair," she says. "It's the going rate for rides these days."

Before stepping out, she squeezes something soft and warm into my hand, then slams the door. I open my fist and find a pair of pink hip-huggers, her phone number black-Sharpied on the butt. I wonder how she got them off, how she knew she was going to give them to me, but I don't think long enough to form an answer. I haven't held women's underwear since my ex, Stephanie, dropped me over a year ago.

I hold them the whole ride back, but it doesn't take long before I start feeling guilty. I know what Uncle Art will think if he sees them. I copy the number on a scrap of paper and throw their pink warmth in the dumpster.

• • •

My uncle's apartment is strung with bible verses on frames, walls wearing crosses like jewelry. I don't mind them, not ever since I decided to become a Christian. Faith is supposed to crutch you along times like these, and though I never had much interest in that stuff before, it seems to be helping. It makes living with Uncle Art easier, anyway. I can listen to his rants on eschatology or supralapsarianism and make sense of them when I need to. I can use his picture of heaven when I start to daydream about the past and all I'm missing by embarking on the straight and narrow.

I wasn't allowed home. My parents were walls as soon as I stepped out of rehab and they weren't going to budge, so I'm crashing on a mattress in Art's office, clothes still stuffed in my blue duffel. He's had his own addictions—still goes to AA now and then—so I guess he understands, but there's still this gap between us, something I can't quite place.

I'm grateful to be out of prison and rehab, but this place makes me feel like I'm already dead. I don't have a job, just watch TV or sit in the quiet. Uncle Art doesn't really want me here, but he'd do anything God told him to and I guess he was commanded to be hospitable. I have nowhere else to go.

• • •

Uncle Art speaks in metaphors. Most come from the bible. He says he's the prodigal son, the lost sheep. He's the clay. God is the potter. He's dust and salt and a branch and God is the vine. They're unnerving to me, and some feel a bit off. It's hard to understand these things, self and God. Maybe these symbols are the best we can do, painting the picture one stroke at a time.

• • •

I used to watch TV on mute at night, but Art said the buzzing kept him up. Now I lay alone on the loveseat until three or four in the

morning, a single lamp aging the wispy strands of web on the ceiling into gray shadows. I've only once spied the maker, the spider. I watched it intently as it hunted a fly near its web and I remember clearly: each time the spider jetted two inches, the fly moved three.

What I've wanted most since quitting meth is to feel normal, like everyone else. Uncle Art tells me that's not an option, not for addicts or for Christians. We're called to be holy and holy means separate, so we have to be different, but I hate the feeling. I still try to walk the same speed as other people in parking lots, still try to smile when others are laughing at something I didn't hear. I can't feel normal no matter how hard I try. I am the spider chasing the fly. It runs farther away every time I make a move to get close.

• • •

I can't stop thinking about Izzy's pink hip-huggers. Even at church, in those glossy oak pews. It's got to be a sin, but I can't help it. A stocky bald man walks on stage, tells us to call him Phil. As my mind replays the warmth in my hand, the faint smell of Izzy's body, Phil tells us about his past addiction to pornography. His wife is already crying in the pew. Phil says addiction isn't about believing that pornography is so great, but that life without it is bland, unnatural. That's how I know he was truly addicted.

Listening to echoes under high ceilings, I feel like I'm at the school cafeteria again. I picture Izzy standing before us instead of Phil. She has great stooped hips and I imagine that she was pretty curvy before the speed dried her out. I catch myself hoping to someday see her as she was, putting my faith in watching her body fill and soften. She's far from it, now. Her back bows in and out with her bones, spine knobs visible through tight tops. But who knows. Maybe I'll know her long enough to see her rebirth. Watch her slowly replace everything the speed took.

I think of that spider on my Uncle's ceiling. I originally

thought it was chasing a fly, but it wasn't. Turns out the other black freckle on the ceiling was just another spider. They were searching for their own kind, for companionship, for whatever it is two spiders can feel for one another. I squint up at the cherry-gloss rafters, imagine the same two spiders creeping toward each other. I pray they touch even though they aren't real.

Uncle Art nudges me in the pew because I'm not listening. Everything is wind and traffic noise under that tall reaching steeple. I can't pay attention. The world has become a dark peripheral blur. Everything feels like one of my disappointing landings after a seven-hour trip, my back hugging the carpet, eyes glossed and filmy. How can the world have light when you've seen stars so bright they've tattooed your retinas?

In the pews, we stand to sing the closing song, eyes tied to the hairy lead singer. He closes his eyes, strums ferociously like he's trying to play himself into heaven. When the song ends he opens them and he's disappointed in what he sees.

• • •

After the service, Uncle Art has some of the guys over to eat pizza and watch the Lions lose. It runs late. All of them are single men with nowhere else better to go, no one waiting up for them. Uncle Art and I can't be around alcohol on account of our pasts, so we eat in excess and yell at the screen to make up for it. Most of the night is a slur of muddy jokes and negligible confessions, but I learn that Uncle Art can talk, tells long indulging stories like the men in prison do, an art I never learned. He tells old stories about my dad, all the mistakes they'd made raising me, like the time they duct-taped my winter hat on so I wouldn't throw it off, having to cut my hair in ugly patches later. Or the time they put too much beer in my bottle and I puked all over the sofa. Mom was so furious she tried to make my dad sleep on the wet stain all night. It feels good to hear these stories. They

make me think that maybe not all my mistakes are my fault.

I watch Phil, the porn addict, as he sits alone on a metal foldout, watching his Blue Moon like a shepherd the whole game. He taunts the TV with timid meows whenever the Lions miss a tackle, follows it with a deep guffaw, neck-skin rumbling beneath his wooly beard. I take a chair next to him after the game. We talk about football and a little about Uncle Art and my parents. I try to ask him about his past, how he's overcome the addiction. He's modest, says he just takes it day by day. He seems more interested in my life, prison specifically, and I don't really want to talk about it, but that's where talk always seems to go.

"You know, I did some time myself," he tells me, leaning in, stomach sagging in his lap. "I was eighteen and stole a stereo. Cops cuffed me in front of my own parents, right there in our backyard."

I don't say anything. I can tell it was easy time. He wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't.

"Yep, I found Jesus behind those bars. It puts a lot of things in perspective. I think everyone should do some time, taste a little bit of hell before it comes," he says. "You find Jesus there?"

"Nope."

"What'd you find?"

"Criminals," I say.

"Well, what made you decide to clean up?"

I open my mouth thinking an answer will come, but it doesn't. The silence sits between us. "A burning bush spoke to me," I finally say.

He guffaws. "I suppose that's as good a reason as any."

• • •

My eyes are bowing heavily by the time the men leave. Uncle Art argues with himself as he continues a conversation once held between himself and another man, refuting claims regarding the problem of

evil. I'm too tired to listen and am already changing clothes in the office, standing in my boxers when Uncle Art walks in.

"No choices," he says. "That's what we'd be talking about. Even evil has a purpose, doesn't it? If we can't choose to worship and obey, what would be the point? We'd be little rats in mazes with only one way to go. Say, what happened to your leg?"

"My what?"

"Your leg," he says, pointing. "You okay?"

I look down to my skin rash, my speed bumps, a few red sores on my thighs where I used to inject. I'm usually more self-conscious about them, feel that queasy mix of guilt and temptation, but tonight I was distracted, forgot all about them. I tell Uncle Art that they're side effects. I avoid the details.

"Oh," he says.

He looks around the room a bit as if he's forgotten why he's come. He moves slowly, his sloth a mix of alcohol and discomfort, before he finally says goodnight.

I lie awake staring at the ceiling. The voices run for hours and I wait for them to say something meaningful, but they never do.

• • •

When I get the nerve to call Izzy for our date she says she doesn't want to go to a movie or a coffee shop or any of the restaurants I suggest.

"Let's stay in," she says.

I have no problem with that.

The road to her apartment glitters with rain leftovers and my blue high-school-old polo rubs my neck. Three smokers eye me as I foot the steps to 31B, but the air smells more like gasoline and cold medicine, a little like urine.

My knocking is three heartbeats. She opens, stands in a baggy green T-shirt, jean shorts, red hair slicked like sheets on either

side of her head, still damp from a shower. She lets me in. I'm feeling less excited as I maneuver around chairs draped with dirty shirts, skirts and socks, like maybe she forgot I was coming. The room is dark, blinds pulled taut with muted blades of light slicing through the window's perimeter. I push aside an old *Cosmopolitan*, some beautiful face stuck in this nasty apartment. A lemon tank-top clings stubbornly to the fabric.

I wait on the couch. I feel put-off and a little sick, but Izzy changes that when she comes next to me, grabs my head and mashes her lips on mine. She helps me lift my arms, pulls up at the sleeves of my polo and tosses it next to her own wrinkled discards. Her legs cross on the couch and I let my hand find one. Her legs are wide in odd places: mid-calf, mid-knee. I can see where her thigh muscles disjoin from the bone, but I don't care. We're all like this, now. Us tweakers. Uncle Art says one day we'll have heavenly bodies, and though I don't know what that means yet, I like how it sounds. It helps me believe all the damage I've done to myself will one day be repaired.

She takes my hand in hers, the one that found her leg, and moves it, pressing it firmly on the cushion between us. The material feels cold and sticky, almost wet, but I can't see anything on it. Her green eyes scalpel my ribs and pale chest and her dissection is cold. I shiver, skin scaling over with goose bumps.

"You remind me of my nephew," she says.

The tone shifts very quickly as she readjusts her seat, creating a distance between us. She starts talking about herself, the bar she works at in town and her nagging mother. She keeps her hands away. I sit quietly, topless, unsure of what to do. She tells me she did time for shoplifting the day after she graduated high school. She's antisocial too, but that cocktail of disorders is not uncommon. She's able to tone it down, just tortures bugs in her apartment. "Daddy-Longlegs are my favorite," she tells me. "I like to pluck their stringy

legs out one by one."

I ramble about Uncle Art and church. Quickly, Izzy interrupts. "We should do this with chalk."

Before I can object, even process what she's said, Izzy's opened the drawer under her coffee table. Pink powder wrapped in plastic. It sits like a miniature shrine in her hand.

"No," is all I muster. It sounds weak, wobbly. I try to think of reasons but they get tangled in my head. No is all I have.

"Come on. Just split a quarter gram with me. A pinch."

"I can't."

"Look," she says. Her hand is on my leg now, upper thigh. "We can't be expected to drop it cold turkey. That's impossible. It's unnatural. We'll do a quarter and that's it. Think of it as mutual encouragement. We'll wean off together."

She almost makes it sound right. It's been three months, between rehab and the few weeks I've been at Uncle Art's. Prison was a joke. It was almost easier to tweak there than on the outside. But I stand my ground, tell her it's not going to happen.

"I have an addictive personality," I say.

She chuckles, snorting. Her legs flex in scraggy bulges as she stands to go to the kitchen. I put my shirt back on and move the pink-powdered baggy to the furthest corner of the coffee table. I think about leaving, but something about the sticky fabric makes it hard to detach myself. Inexplicably, I'm still curious, even hopeful. She's not perfect, but she's friendly. Better than I deserve.

Izzy comes back fisting two Rolling Rocks and hands me one. She sits and places two fingers on my elbow, the one sprawled with a black cobweb tattoo. I didn't realize she could see it, must've spotted it while she was walking over.

"How long were you in for?"

"Twenty-eight months."

She sips, lips pushed fat on the bottle.

"Must've been some stash. Who'd you used to buy from?" she asks. Her tone says she doesn't care whether I answer or not, but I'm smart enough to know she does.

I shrug. "You wouldn't know him."

"You'd be surprised."

She opens the drawer again and pulls out a bag of bud. She explains that she makes her own meth in her bathroom, can sell it to me for cheap, but she buys bud.

"Not scared of a little choke, are you?"

Counselors constantly warned us about the slippery slopes. But I can tell Izzy's getting bored, impatient. I tell her to light it up.

Rain plinks at the window. Izzy and I trade memories as we share the same smoke. She remembers the first time she hit a cat with her car, how she pulled over to inspect the tawny tom, its ribcage caved in. I remember the verses my parents would read me every time they caught me with vodka or bud: Psalm seventy-eight, seventeen and eighteen. I remember the numbers of the references, but the words escape me. Meth is like that, always attacking my memories, like antibodies, as if my past were a disease, all my hard-earned life lessons reduced to infections.

Five hits in and we're both feeling it. We kiss a little more, but Izzy can't stop laughing, spraying my mouth with hot air when it bursts out. I'm too tired to get angry, so I lay back on the couch, sink deeper into the filth, one of her old socks sticking to my back.

I start to see spiders, real ones, scuttling across Izzy's dirty walls. Their hurried legs move like shadows to a flame's flicker. I remember the spider at Uncle Art's, the one trying to get away from what I once believed to be a fly or friend, the ambiguity greater now.

I must start wailing because soon Izzy is teasing me. She calls me homo, boy scout, loser, anything she thinks might rile me. She takes the pink baggy from the table and dangles it in front of my face, tickles my lips and nose with it. I slap it away, but she brings it

right back. Her eyes are big, lids stretched back in excitement as she mocks me, and I can see red veins at their outer edges. I came here wanting to connect, for her to take me seriously, to want me. Now I just want her to stop.

"One pinch. That's it," she says as she drops some speed in her beer. She takes one careful sip as if it were the blood of a Eucharist.

She hands me the bag. I dip my fingers, infinitesimal grains lodged in my fingertips. I drop it in my Rolling Rock and the meth falls like pink snow. The voices are in full storm before the bottle ever touches my lips, and everything melts together in a web of time and light and beautiful sound.

• • •

When I watched that spider on the ceiling, watched it run from love or cannibalism or worse, it bungee jumped from the white and plunged until it ran out of web. It came within a foot of my knee, dangling like a star, and I crashed, staring at my knee, remembering where and who I was. Man. Addict. Nothing more. Certainly not a spider.

There are no deeper meanings no matter how many we find. We are the flesh we fight against. We are the bones pushing to get out.

• • •

The truck stop is cool and wet from the evening rain and all the lights from the moon and stars and pump canopy glimmer on the slick blacktop as if it were a cavernous sea. I'm counting the needles of light on the ground, marveling at the number, telling them to hold still, that it's difficult to count so many when they keep trading places. Some truckers have gathered around me in a crescent, smiling

like jackals.

"His shoes are untied."

"Funny. He strikes me as more of a Velcro kind of guy."

"It's a shame," one insists, shaking his head. "He's just a kid."

I'm still holding my Rolling Rock, its frigidity clutched in my left fist. Small pieces of the night come back to me without order or reason, and I know I left Izzy's in the rain, ran a good seven miles through wet city streets and country fields, kicking up gravel and sludge until I hit the nearest onramp and thought better of footing I-94 at midnight. I found the truck stop and let the high peter out here in the after-rain, all while gripping my beer. The ankles of my jeans are clotted with mud as souvenir. My head throbs mercilessly.

I lift my head from the shimmering pavement and look to the truckers.

"Phone?" I ask.

A few point to the bright red and yellow Pilot station.

I head in its direction, tell the stars on the ground to stay put, I'll be back. I trudge the gritty pavement and feel my mind slowly turn on like an old television. And this was always the part I hated most: the slow transition back to a world I had disappointed.

The night attendant is a boring man my age with dark eyes and a painted frown. He sits lifeless at the corner and judges me as I cross over the dirty entry mat, approaching the counter. I ask him for the phone.

"What for?" he says.

"To request a song," I say. "Hotel California."

The attendant grunts, steps off his stool. His eyes are pasted on me, the eyes I see in dreams and imagine might be waiting for me when I die, the sum of my life laid out for everyone to consider.

He comes back with the phone, but when I see the numbers I realize I'm still tweaking, can't remember more than two digits of

Uncle Art's number.

"And a phone book?"

I muddle through the fragile pages. The phone rings four times before Uncle Art picks up. He doesn't sound very pleased. I tell him where I am and he's silent for a long time, so long I start to think he's given up on me altogether, is busy carrying my clothes to the curb. I wouldn't blame him.

"Uncle Art?"

"You're where?"

"Off 94," I repeat. "Exit 104."

"What in God's name..."

"At the Pilot. It's bright," I say. I don't know why I say it.

He curses, tells me not to move.

I wait outside to avoid the attendant, move to the back of the building to avoid the truckers. I stand breathing in the surrounding black, everything still and timeless. The Rolling Rock remains in my hand, half-inch of backwash pooled in the bottom and it sloshes when I shake it. The glass is cold and my knuckles hurt from gripping so long. I haven't decided why I'm still holding it, why it seems stitched so tightly to my palm. It's practically empty, nothing to offer but my own spit and the remnants of a convicting memory.

I pocket my free hand. Inside, I feel my wallet and keys tucked away. I hadn't thought of checking. I almost thank God before reaching into my other pocket, but I would've spoken too soon. Inside is a small bag of meth—nearly half a gram of pink powder. I open my wallet; all the cash gone, nearly a hundred dollars. The only paper remaining is the scrap with Izzy's phone number.

Part of me wants to empty the bag into my mouth. Just curl up on the gritty concrete and let the moisture seep into my clothes as I tweak alone in the dark until my heart hammers itself into mush. But the more I look at the pink powder and think back to Izzy's hip-

huggers with the phone number, I realize I've been conned all along. Betrayed by her, by speed, by all the systems promising to fix me. And no matter how much I take, it'll never be like the first time.

In the outer rim of light, truckers assemble at their cabs and I can hear their voices through the otherwise soundless night. With my back to them, I quickly pour the meth down the mouth of the bottle. Sandy residue cleaves to the glass and I wipe it away. I toss the bag and sit on the hard step beneath the canopy. The brilliant lights buzz like horseflies. I pretend they're the voice of God telling me it'll be okay.

• • •

The bottle is still tight in my hands when Uncle Art's blue Chevy rolls up.

"Get in the car," he orders.

The car is dark and warm. Uncle Art stares at the windshield, takes us to the freeway where we see city lights spill over the horizon in reds and pale yellows. We're past the apex of night, waiting for daybreak to come, but the darkness is stubborn, lingering longer than anyone thinks it will. A faint Billy Joel plays us out.

I put the bottle in the cup holder and keep my eyes away from Uncle Art.

"Where'd you get that?"

I shrug. Outside my window, hazy tan barriers zoom past as if they're traveling back to where I've been to investigate the scene.

"Want to tell me why I'm picking you up from a gas station at two in the morning?"

"Not especially."

He releases a breath and it grates like it's been building pressure. I feel like I'm six years old, scolded for failing a spelling test.

"You think I don't know what's going on."

"I never said that."

"You think I don't, but I can tell when a man's been bitten again. You think I've never seen men come to meetings hung over?"

I don't answer. The windshield budgets orange streetlight as it paints the cab a dim amber. It's difficult for either of us to see the other.

"You know how hard it is to push a boulder up a mountain?" he asks me. "It's a lot harder than just keeping it from rolling down."

"I'm sure you know all about it."

He pauses. I've offended him, because he does know, went through rehab for his drinking, still goes to AA. But it's not the same. My sin is different. Still, he tries.

"I know it's going to take some time. You'll have to restart the engine, shift your way up gear by gear until you're back to where you were."

"Would you stop talking like that?" I say. "You have to compare everything you see to a metaphor just so you can understand it. But you haven't lived in the same world I have, so you shouldn't try to talk about it. I've been closer to heaven than you can dream. I've knocked at its door, smelled its air through open windows."

"You have," he says. "But you're no closer now."

"Neither are you."

We drive on. Patches of trees lay against the night like bristly hair jutting out from the crooks of a corpse. The quiet hum of the road carries us as if it were the commanding voice of some tireless spirit, airy and elusive to the world it works in. Our car passes a lifeless doe strewn across the shoulder and I imagine its sour odor. Inside the car, the air smells of Uncle Art and me, the mildew stench of my damp clothes.

A siren blares and it's on us like a cold splash of water. We hear the double-tap wail before we see the red and blue lights dancing in the rearview. We watch it together in the dark, hearts jolting, both of us found in our transgressions, the only car for a mile.

We pull over, wet gravel crumbling. I hear the officer open his door, watch as Uncle Art stares at his side view, his jaw twitching with the rhythm of the lights.

"Don't say a word," he says to me.

The officer knocks on the window and Uncle Art runs it down halfway.

"Evening officer."

"Evening?" His flashlight shines mercilessly at our faces. "Closer to morning. You mind fully rolling down your window?"

"Anything wrong?"

"Just the window at the moment."

The officer takes Uncle Art's papers and then it's just the two of us again. My head burns even as the cool night air brushes through our cab. We sit in silence.

When the officer comes back to the side of the car, he's smiling. He offers Uncle Art's registration and license, tells us they're just doing night checks. Neither Uncle Art nor I bother to ask what that means.

"Hang on there." The officer scans his light back inside the cab and stops. There, the Rolling Rock's green glass gleams in the darkness like ancient emerald, an archaeological find. "Sir, are you aware of the open container laws in the state of Michigan?"

I'd forgotten about the bottle, had been paralyzed by the red and blue dance. Uncle Art can only look at me for a half-second before he addresses the officer. He looks nearly paralyzed himself, trapped between the judgment of the officer and turning me in.

"You mind stepping out of the vehicle for me?"

Uncle Art obeys, pops the door and steps out. He stands listening as he takes the breathalyzer, as the officer shows him how to walk a straight line, how to hold out his arms and touch his nose. He does it all, everything asked of him, with the same expression stretched across his face. It's a sad look, no longer angry or instructional. Just

beaten. Humiliated. It's for both of us, somehow, or maybe just for me. He could've told the officer everything, even asked him to check the bottle for evidence. But instead he stands on the side of the road like a criminal, his face alternating red and blue, slowly proving his innocence. And I sit in the car stealing every breath my lungs can hold.

• • •

I'm up all night soaking in the sounds of dawn: the scratching of squirrels, the maniacal cackling of birds, the growling resurrections of engines in the parking lot. The whole time I'm waiting for it, for its brisk skittish movements, its black purity. Finally it comes, like a ghost manifested from air, and I wonder where it's been, where it goes when I can't see it. It tends to its web, spools silky strands across the ceiling corner. I fade into my own secret darkness while watching it work.

When I awake, it's gone. The average person swallows four spiders a year in their sleep. I wonder if I'll ever see that spider again, or if it's become a part of me, sucked in and swallowed like a crumb of bread at communion.

Later that afternoon, Uncle Art takes me back to the dirty brick apartments to get my car, says it's on his way to his second shift, that he wouldn't take me otherwise. He's carping the whole time about last night and the hundred-fifty dollar ticket, though I think he got off easy, a much lighter sentence than I'd anticipated.

His Chevy flees the scene and I stand in the cool air looking up at the window on the third floor, Izzy's blinds still drawn. The pavement and walls are stained like they're covered in bruises. Even the sky here is smeared with gray imperfections. I move my car to the far side of the lot where payphones stab the open wounds of the sidewalk. I wait. I take two quarters from my ashtray and slide them against each other in shrill metallic notes. I wait some more. I picture

the brick buildings surrounded by the cleansing black and whites of police cars, picture Izzy's face alternating red and blue like Uncle Art's did the night before.

It's a quarter of five when I step out ready to talk to her. I just want to talk, I've decided. To figure out what happened, if any part of last night was soft and real, if there was any life to it. I walk slowly through the lot. Beneath the stairs, in the shadows, a tall dark figure ambles forth like a giraffe with a bad leg.

"You? Who are you?" the figure asks. "I know you."

I take a step back. Emerging in the light is Willis, the gaunt giant from support group. He wanders close to me. I can smell beer on his breath, can see the scraps of his good looks are all but gone now, his faceskin working overtime.

"Who are you?" he asks again. "We know each other?"

I study him as he tilts feebly. I place my hand on his bony shoulder, try to steady his shifting weight.

"Jerry?" he says. "Is that Jerry? Who are you?"

I have no idea who Jerry is. His eyes are glossy and red, engulfed in the images of a different dimension. He's tripping, won't remember this scene once he comes to. The night will come back to him like puzzle pieces, jagged timeless shavings.

"I am the spider," I tell him. I'm slow and deliberate so he'll understand, though there's nothing to understand. He falsifies eyes of recognition, wide and final.

"Oh! You're the spider. What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to bring this place down. I'm going to burn it down in red and blue."

"Oh no," he says.

"I'm going to call the sheriff's department," I say, "and I'm going to tell them all about 31B. I'm going to talk about the junkies coming in and out and the burnt tire smells."

"Oh no."

"Yes."

I let go of his shoulder and he starts strolling down to the other side of the street. He's twitching in brisk shivers, worried. I tell him to leave, to get as far away as he can.

"It's coming down," I say. "Go home."

"Okay."

I wait for him to leave and I wait for a long time. He makes his way down the sidewalk, transforms his body into a freckle, a fly on the horizon. And I can only imagine what he thinks of me. An ominous figure ushering judgment. A god authoring the future of this broken place. I finger the quarters in my pocket, look up to the sky. It's brushed in peaceful pinks and purples, the clouds dark and tall like the towers of some distant kingdom. Soon the sun will scorch it orange and it will fade into black, into nothing at all. Somehow, there will be something left.